

# **A Note On The Term "BISHNUPRIYA MANIPURI"**

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and nowhere else."**

**\* "The Bishnupriyas have every right to use the term Manipuri."**

**Dr. KALI PRASAD SINHA**

**Aja Babaisena Prakashani  
Divyashram, Kachudharam ,  
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Price : Rs - 20.00

A Note on the Term "Bishnupriya Manipuri".

By

Dr. Kali Prasad Sinha M.A. , Ph.D., D. Litt. Gitacharya.

First Editon :

The 25th of May, 1975 .

Second Edition :

The 16th of March, 2014.

(Shahid Divas)

Published by

Shyamananda Sinha

Aja Babaisena Prakashani ,

Divyashram, Kachudharam, Chincoorie, Silchar - 788007.

Dist. Cachar, Assam.

Printed at

Krishna Kanta Printers

Chincoorie, Silchar - 7

Sponsored by Master Biraj Memorial Trust,  
F-14, Indra Prastha Apptt. Delhi-110092

Price : Rs.- 20.00

## ***Preface of the first edition***

*Dr. K.P. Sinha, the author of this essay, is a forerunner and authority in the field of Bishnupriya Manipuri linguistics. He was awarded the degree of Ph. D. by the Jadavpur University on his thesis 'A Study in the Bishnupriya Manipuri Language.' He has also compiled an etymological dictionary of this language which is certainly an immense treasure of this language. A number of his articles on this language have been published in a number of renowned journals, such as, 'The Indian Linguistics,' 'The pratishruti' and others. This essay of Dr. Sinha, methinks, is the best possible solution of the long-standing conflict between the two sections of the Manipuris, namely, the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas, and shows a path towards the maintenance of brotherly relation between these two sections.*

**Manikanta Sinha**

**President,**

**Bishnupriya Manipuri Sahitya Parishad,  
Silchar Branch.**

**P.O. Singari, Silchar- 4**

**Dt. Cachar, Assam.**

**Singari,  
the 25th May, '75.**





## Master Biraj Memorial Trust

F-14, Indra Prashta Apptt.

Delhi - 110092.

We convey our heartfelt thanks and gratitude to AJA BABAISENA PRAKASHANI who took the responsibility and showed sincere commitment to publish the second edition of the book named "A NOTE ON THE TERM BISHNUPRIYA MANIPURI" written by Dr. K.P. Sinha at our request. This book will certainly give some vital informations about the Bishnupriya Manipuri Language to the readers.

5th February, 2014

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## **A Note on the Term “Bishnupriya Manipuri”**

### **1. Controversy between the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas—**

The term ‘Bishnupriya Manipuri’ has become an apple of discord between the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas. The Meiteis hold that they are the ‘real Manipuris’ inhabiting the land of Manipur from centuries before Christ while the Bishnupriyas are the descendants of some Bengalees who entered the land only a few centuries back. Accordingly, they call the Bishnupriyas ‘Mayangs’ i.e., ‘foreigners’ or ‘westerners’, and hold that the Bishnupriyas should not use the term ‘Manipuri’, either before or after the term ‘Bishnupriya’, to identify themselves and their language. This issue has been taken for discussion in this essay.

It should be noted that, the Bishnupriyas also, quite contrary to the view of the Meiteis, hold that, they are the ‘real Manipuris’ inhabiting the land from the time of the Mahabharata war and that the Meiteis are the descendants of some immigrants from the surrounding hills to the valley. They, accordingly, call the Meiteis ‘Khai’, i.e. ‘(the people of) the Chinese group’ and oppose the Meiteis using the term Manipuri. To the Bishnupriyas, Manipuri is a misnomer for ‘Meitei’.

Thus, each of these two sections try to identify themselves as the real Manipuris and regard the other section as non-Manipuris. And, in this encounter, the Bishnupriyas are lagging behind, because of the fact that their language is now extinct in Manipur and that the Meitei language has been recognised as ‘Manipuri’ by the Govt. of



India. Some Bishnupriyas even now oppose the usage of the term 'Manipuri' to denote 'Meitei' or 'Meitei Manipuri.' But, the general notion is not so much against the usage of the term 'Manipuri' for 'Meitei' as for the defence of the usage of the term 'Manipuri' (either as a prefix or as a suffix) along with the term Bishnupriya. On this issue the present writer has a few reservations.

## **2. The Low-Caste Bangalee-Hindu Theory.**

According to the extremist Meiteis, the Bishnupriyas are the descendants of some low-caste Bengalee-Hindus who were brought captive by some king of Manipur and the Bishnupriya language is the language of those captives. This view has nowhere been enunciated in details. The upholders of this view simply quote a few lines from the 'Linguistic Survey of India' Vol. III, Part-III to support their view. These lines go thus : "There is also a degraded class called Kalachaiya or Bishnupuri, which consists of the descendants of Doms and other Bengalis of low-caste ..... They speak a language ..... closely allied to vulgar Bengali," These lines have been quoted by Grierson from Gait's 'Assamese Census Report', but, curiously enough, all the upholders of this view ascribe it to Grierson. However, it seems that the low-case Bengalee Hindus referred to here are those who were hold captive by king Khagenba of Manipur in the beginning of the 17th century.

As against this view the following arguments may be put forward.

First, the remarks made by some person should not be taken for granted without scrutiny. It cannot be said that these remarks are



true simply because Gait has said so. One may as well quote a few lines from R. M. Nath's 'The Background of Assamese Culture' and say that "It is quite probable that the Khalachais (Bishnupriyas) were the the first cultured race in possession of the Manipur valley." In the opinion of the present writer, however, both these remarks are partial and none of them should be taken for granted to suit some presumption.

Secondly, this view magnifies what actually happened. The Bishnupriyas are the descendants of some Indo-Aryan people who poured into the valley of Manipur from various parts of India, specially from the eastern part from the beginning of the Christian era. Some of these people were absorbed into the Tibeto-Burman speaking people around, while others retained their distinction. As days went on, the population of the immigrants increased because of further immigration. All these immigrants, being plain-people, it is obvious, lived in the valley and gradually gained strength and formed a class of their own. It seems that the Kamrupi people who entered Manipur in the company of Mayang Leima or Chingurembi who was married to king Naothing Khong of Manipur (663 A.D.) were the first memorable pioneers of these people. After them, the most remarkable immigrants were some people from Bengal who entered Manipur during the 13th and the 14th centuries. And different languages of these people mixed with the Tibeto-Burman languages formed a new language towards the 15th century, which is the early form of the Bishnupriya language. Later on, still more waves of Aryan speaking people entered Manipur from time to time and many of them were absorbed among the Bishnupriyas. Of the later immigrants, the most remarkable were some low-caste Bengalee Hindus who

were taken captive by Khagenba in the 17th century and some other Bengali speaking people who came from Rangamati in the company of some Dhanapati Rajkumar, in the middle of the 18th century.

It is, thus, clear that the upholders of the theory concerned magnify the event of the low-caste Bengalee captives of the 17th century. In fact, the Bishnupriyas, like the any other community, comprised people of different castes, most of whom came from Bengal and Kamrup and the said low-caste Bengalees were but a small fraction of the whole community. And, to regard the whole community as descendants of low-caste Bengalees is nothing but falsifying the fact. Truly speaking, such low-caste people were absorbed among the Meiteis also, and such events occur in the history of every community.

Thirdly, the captives referred to were brought from East Bengal. On the other hand, Bishnupriya betrays similarities more with the language of West Bengal (Radha) of the 14th century and of Kamrup than with that of East Bengal. These features cannot be explained if it is said that the Bishnupriyas are the descendants of those low-caste Bengalees of East Bengal.

Fourthly, the captives referred to were only soldiers i.e. only males, and consisted of both the Hindus and the Muslims. Of them, the Muslims fully adopted the Meitei language as their mother tongue whereas the Hindus retained their own tongue. This difference cannot be accounted for if the Hindu captives are regarded as the only forefathers of the Bishnupriyas. In the opinion of the present writer, however, the Hindus retained their language, because they were absorbed into a larger class of the same or allied stock, whereas the Muslims married Meitei girls and, consequently, lost their



language.

The view of low-caste Bengalee Hindus, therefore, can in no way be accepted.

### **3. Existence : Earliest Existence of Bishnupriya Manipuri in Manipur.**

Some hold that the Bishnupriya language never existed in Manipur. But this is a fantastic view. That Bishnupriya existed in Manipur is clear as sunshine.

Works such as 'An Account of the Valley of Munnipore' by Major Mc. Culleck, 1849, 'Ethnology of Bengal', by Dalton, 1872, 'Imperial Gazetteer of India', 1907, 'Linguistic Survey of India', by G.A. Grierson, 1903 and others, bear testimonies to the existence of Bishnupriya in Manipur in the 19th century. The 'Khumal Purana' of Navakhendra refers to the existence of this language in Manipur during the reign of Garib Nawaj i.e. during the 18th century. By analysing the language and culture as revealed in a few folk-songs of Bishnupriya the present writer has come to the conclusion that some of those songs were composed during the 17th and the 18th centuries. The oldest of these folk-songs is a rain song which represents a non-Vaisnavite early religion with 'Pahangpa' and 'Soralel' as the most prominent gods. The language of the song is also archaic and, as such, a greater portion of the song is not yet understandable. From these and other factors, the present writer thinks that the essence of the song was composed in the 16th century.

The Rain-song reveals that Bishnupriya of that time incorporated numerous Meitei words. This further goes to say that the speakers of Bishnupriya lived with the Meiteis for a considerable

period of time before the time of the composition of the rain-song. And, from a linguistic analysis, it is seen that most of the morphological elements of Bishnupriya agree with those of the eastern group of Indo-Aryan that was prevalent around the 13th and the 14th centuries. It can, therefore, be well surmised that Bishnupriya was separated from the eastern group of Indo-Aryan during the formative period of the New Indo-Aryan languages or some time later and existed in Manipur from that time onwards.

Of course, as stated above, from the beginning of the Christian era waves of Indo-Aryan speaking people poured into Manipur from time to time and the languages of these people might have contributed some elements to the formation of Bishnupriya.

#### **4. Formation of Bishnupriya in Manipur.**

Some hold that Bishnupriya came to Manipur from abroad and is not a language of the soil, but the characteristics of this language do not contribute to this view. It is true that some of the elements of Bishnupriya agree with those of Bengali, some, with those of Assamese and so on. But that does not prove that Bishnupriya came from Bengal or from Assam. Bishnupriya has developed from the same source i.e. Magadhi Apabhramsa from which Assamese and Bengali evolved. But, when it came to Manipur, it underwent a remarkable change as a result of the mixture of different dialects, and of the incorporation of numerous words from Meitei. So, Bishnupriya, as understood today, cannot be said to have come from Bengal or Assam. In fact, Bishnupriya betrays some features which do not exist either in Bengali or Assamese. To recapitulate some points stated earlier—(1) in Bishnupriya verbal forms change according to number



and gender, (2) it has a few case-affixes of its own, (3) it has got a number of formative affixes which are not found in any other languages, (4) it has developed a complete t-form for the future tense, (5) it has got some distinctive pronominal forms and (6) it has incorporated about four thousand words and a few affixes from Meitei. No historian or linguist can prove that such a language existed outside Manipur before the language came into being in Manipur. In other words, **Bishnupriya Manipuri was formed on the soil of Manipur and nowhere else.**

Thus, it may be summarised that Bishnupriya is an Indo-Aryan language of the eastern group and was formed in Manipur towards the 14th and the 15th centuries. And, thus it is also a Manipuri language. This should not be regarded as a manipulation of the young generation of today. It has got a long history behind it. G.A. Grierson also has recorded this language as 'Bishnupuriya Manipuri.'

##### **5. Concepts of 'Manipur' and 'Manipuri.'**

Historians without any prejudice will agree with the present writer that the concepts of 'Manipur' and 'Manipuri' are not very old. No old record of Manipur has retained these names. Formerly different parts of the land were known by the different names of Manipuri clans. Then it was known, probably towards the 16th century, as Mekhali and then, probably towards the 17th century, it was named Manipur. Formerly the present Manipur was divided into small territories occupied by different clans of the Mongoloid people, such as, the Khumals, the Moirangs, the Angoms, the Nithoujas (Meiteis) and the Luangs. The people of these clans used to identify themselves and their languages by the names of their respective clans. It is only towards the 15th century A. D. that the Meiteis occupied all

all the territories and established a sovereign kingdom, which was known to the Meiteis as 'Meitei Leipak' or 'the land of the Meiteis.' As a result of this Meiteiisation, the languages of the different clans got intermixed and, consequently, the Meitei language was formed. In other words, the Meitei language, as it is understood today, was formed after the 15th century A. D.

And, the Bishnupriyas were living in the valley of Manipur from centuries before the period of Meiteiisation. A full discussion on the controversies on this point will lead us a long way off. To avoid this, at present, this much can be said that, the Meiteis call the Bishnupriyas 'Mayangs' i. e. 'foreigners' or 'westerners' and the history of the Mayangs in Manipur goes back as early as to the 7th century A. D. if not still earlier. That does not mean that the Bishnupriya language, as it is understood today, is the language of those Mayangs of the 7th or the 8th century. Bishnupriya language is a New Indo-Aryan and, as such, could not be formed before the 11th or 12th century A. D. It can, however, be said, that the Bishnupriya language is a developed form of, or somehow related with the language of those immigrants who entered Manipur before the 12th or the 13th century A.D. In other words, before the 12th or the 13th century A.D. the Mayangs or the Bishnupriyas in Manipur spoke some Apabhramsa form of the eastern group of Indo-Aryan. And the Bishnupriya language, as understood today, was formed towards the 14th and the 15th centuries as a result of the mixture of the different dialects of Indo-Aryan and Meitei.

To summarise the position, first, the different clans of the Mongolid people and the Mayangs or Bishnupriyas were living side by side in Manipur for centuries before the 15th century, secondly, the Meitei language was formed after the 15th century A. D. and the



Bishnupriya language was formed towards the 15th century, both on the soil of Manipur. On the other hand the term Manipur was attributed to the land in all probability after this period. i. e. –towards the 17th century when it was on way to full Aryanisation. And, consequently, the term Manipuri was attributed to the people of Manipur. So, when the terms of Manipur and Manipuri came into use both the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas had equal rights to the terms. It might be that one section entered earlier and the other later, but that does not go against the indigenoussness of the later immigrants. The Muslims entered India only after the 10th century A. D., but, for that, they do not cease to be Indians.

#### **6. Formation of a homogeneous culture.**

Culturally, the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas cannot be distinguished from each other. As to religion, it goes without saying that these two sections have formed a unique religion. The Bishnupriyas accepted all the prominent gods of the Meiteis, namely. Soralel, Pahangpa, Senamahi, Apokpa and others, just as the Meiteis adopted numerous Hindu gods. At the next step, when the Vaisnavism of Sri Chaitanya entered Manipur, all of these two sections, excepting some spurious cases, adopted the religion. This religion brought a radical change in the Manipuri society and both the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas were equally influenced by it. As a result, they developed a homogeneous culture and the concept of one community grew among them. This can be testified by the facts that there was no bar to matrimonial relation between the two sections. A girl of any section could formally be accepted into the other section without any propitiation. Members of these two sections took parts jointly in religious and social feasts and ceremonies.

The greatest features of the Manipuri culture are the Kirtana and Rasalila and these features have got equal prominence in both the sections. Members of the two sections equally take part in them, they equally feel proud for the fine arts. Artists of any section would with equal honour and feeling of kinness take part in the Kirtanas of the other section. Marriage system, dress, ornaments and everything are common to both the sections. Thus, it is clear that the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas formed a homogeneous culture in Manipur.

The only impediment is, as ill luck would have it, the difference of language : the Meitei language is of the Tibeto-Burman group whereas the Bishnupriya language falls in the group of Indo-Aryan. In Manipur there is no problem, because the Bishnupriyas there adopted Meitei as their mother tongue. But, the Bishnupriyas living outside Manipur had to leave the country before the final unification, and as such, retain their language. But this linguistic difference should not be given much prominence because culturally, these two sections are one.

## **7. Conventional use of the terms 'Bishnupriya' 'Meitei' and 'Manipuri'**

Any person without prejudice will agree that among themselves no person of the either sections uses the term 'Manipuri' to identify himself and his language. People of both the sections simply use the terms 'Meitei' and 'Bishnupriya' for the purpose. It is only when they introduce themselves and their language to one of any other community that they use the term Manipuri. And the term is used by both the sections with equal force, it was never monopolised by any section. And, to be frank, the Meiteis are more in favour of the term 'Meitei'. They call their land 'Meitei Leipak', their dance 'Meitei Jagoi' (cf



'Meitei Jagoi' by Sura Chandra Sarma, 1965), and their language 'Meitei' and so on. In the Calcutta University also their language was recognised as 'Meitei (Manipuri).' The Bishnupriyas, on the other hand, are more in favour of the term 'Manipuri'. Even a few years back, no Bishnupriya would identify himself as Bishnupriya, but as 'Manipuri.;

#### **8. Present position of the term 'Manipuri.'**

After a few years of independence, the term 'Manipuri' was chosen for the Meitei language by the Govt. of India, as there are no indigenous Bishnupriya speakers in Manipur and the formal use of the term 'Manipuri' by the Meiteis is in process. But the Bishnupriyas, in pursuance of their tradition, call their language Manipuri even now and use the term 'Bishnupriya' to distinguish it from Meitei, just as the Meiteis use in private talks the term Manipuri to identify themselves and their language to one of any other community and use the term 'Meitei' to distinguish themselves from the Bishnupriyas. Even today, no Meitei introduces himself to a Bishnupriya as 'Manipuri'.

#### **9. Probable solution of the conflict.**

To summarise the whole position. (1) both the Bishnupriyas and the Meiteis were inhabiting Manipur side by side for centuries, (2) both Meitei and Bishnupriya were formed on the soil of Manipur some five or six hundred years ago, (3) both the sections have a common stock of culture and (4) both the sections use the term 'Manipuri' in common. So, the solution would have been to use the terms 'Meitei Manipuri' and the 'Bishnupriya Manipuri' for the 'Meitei' and the 'Bishnupriya' languages respectively. But, course of events has changed the position. The present writer is not going to dictate

the Meiteis to change their name but he finds no reason as to why the Bishnupriyas should not be allowed to use the term 'Manipuri' alongwith the differentia 'Bishnupriya.' The idea behind the term Manipuri is ingrained in the hearts of the Bishnupriyas. They are proud of the Manipuri culture : its dance, kirtana, dress etc. If, in spite of all this, the term Manipuri is robbed of them, they will be cut off from the mainstream of the culture and civilisation of Manipur of which they feel so proud and behind which there is a long tradition. And, if the Meiteis consider these factors with a liberal and sympathetic heart, they will find that the Bishnupriyas' love for the term Manipuri is quite reasonable and is not a mere baseless emotion. **The Bishnupriyas have every right to use the term Manipuri.** If they are not allowed to use the term, we shall have reasons to think that some subversive factors behind are at work. And, if the Meitei intelligentia come forward with an accommodating mind, there is every chance that the problem will be solved and the losing brotherly feeling between the two sections will be regained.





Dr. Kali Prasad Sinha was born on the 3rd January, 1937 at a village of Kachudharam, Silchar, Dist. Cachar, Assam. He passed M.A. from Jadavpur University in 1963. He obtained the Ph. D. degree from the same University on his thesis 'A Study in the Bishnupriya Manipuri Language.' He also obtained the D. Litt. degree from the Bardwan University in 1982 on his thesis 'The Concept of the Absolute in Indian Philosophy.' He was a devoted researcher in different fields of Indian philosophy. Besides, he was the first exponent of the

Bishnupriya Manipuri linguistics. By the conclusive evidences submitted by Dr. Sinha before the OBC commission, the long standing conflict between the Meiteis and the Bishnupriyas comes to an end and the Bishnupriyas can, at present, identify themselves as 'Bishnupriya Manipuri.' For this reason and other immortal works in the field of Bishnupriya Manipuri literature, some remarkable persons and organizations honoured him as 'the father of the Bishnupriya Manipuri Community (Jatir Janak).

He died on 2nd June, 2011.